"To promote Christian ideals for agriculture and rural life; to interpret the spiritual and religious values which inhere in the processes of agriculture and the relationships of rural life; to magnify and dignify the rural church; to provide a means of fellowship and cooperation among rural agencies: *Toward a Christian Rural Civilization.*"

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SOME COMMON CONCERNS and the COOPERATIVE APPROACH

By Ralph L. Williamson*

In the name of Christ we are met to consider mutual matters dealing with his religion and ours in town and country communities. Our Lord was a rural person, particularly at home in the countryside and drawing freely upon it for physical and intellectual sustenance and spiritual renewal. Only rarely did Jesus enter into the cities of his time. He loved the rural surroundings and used them as a sounding board for his words and deeds and ideas. One of his ideas was the brotherhood of humanity and the oneness of his followers. We are concerned with these concepts and ideals of his in this hour.

I am to discuss the cooperative approach to some of our common concerns. As we proceed I propose that we center our attention on the community as the frame of reference and on people and their needs. Interchurch cooperation is an explosive subject in many of our communities and can scarcely be called a peaceful topic in any! Yet we must discuss it and work at it.

It would be a ghastly experience if we did not face and frankly discuss the facts of our divided Protestantism. Like many of you, I am deeply committed to the cooperative approach to religion and life. It pervades much of my thinking about economics, governmental and world affairs, and all forms of human association in community and church life.

TRADITION OF MUTUAL AID

Cooperation is truly American. The early New England communities and others were founded by mutual effort motivated by religious ideals. The barn raisings of pioneer days were accomplished together. Even yet, in this sophisticated age, we find in the press frequent stories of cooperative effort in planting or harvesting the crops for a neighbor in distress. People hunger for

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* From an address made before the National Town and Country Church Convocation, National Council of the Churches of Christ in USA, Columbus, Ohio, October 29, 1952. Mr. Williamson is a field director of The Rural Church Institute with headquarters in Anabel Taylor Hall, Ithaca, New York.

stories of such mutual aid. Our consolidated schools are examples of cooperation. Farmers' cooperatives were never so extensive and useful as at present.

We do not need to apologize for being committed to cooperation in religion. The eventful unity for which Christ prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane may be far off, but it is on its way. We are part of a divine movement. I thank God for those leaders who once upon a time opened my eyes to the fact that this is basically a cooperative universe and that religion is meant by God to be the most uniting force in it.

We must cooperate or unite in order to accomplish the work of redemption in our rural communities. Separate churches acting separately are not and cannot be adequate channels of redemption. Long experience shows this with painful clarity.

Redemption should be extended to every individual, every group, and every institution in the community. The churches need to reach out and in -- out to every individual and in to every group. There must be a consuming desire to reach those on the backroads as well as in the village centers.

Rev. Philip Pitcher, a rural Methodist minister, coined a vivid illustration for this a few years ago when he wrote that the effectiveness of a rural pastor might be gauged by the mud on the running gears of his car. For the back roads are still dirt roads. People live there, and they must be reached and won for Christ.

PEOPLE RESPOND

People still respond to cooperative efforts. Oh, I know that often there is a short-time response to the rankest sort of competition. But it is killing in its effect and it does not last. For lasting results cooperation is essential. The new strength and power, the reversal of downward membership trends, and the enthusiasm found in many united churches testify eloquently that people will respond. This fact was one of the strongest impressions received in my recent study of federated churches in which 101 of the 603 federations in the United States were represented. This response is by no means confined to federated churches.

I know that personal sin and numerous other factors enter into alienation from Christ and his church. I also know that the sin of our division is a major factor. I know a village in which a successful united youth fellowship was developed during the 1940's with fifty to sixty young people in attendance. It lasted for five or six years. Then a new pastor came to one of the churches and broke it up by insisting that he have his own youth separately. Consequently all the churches lost many of their youth. Since the end of World War II four churches in this village of 1,400 have spent over $50,000 on property improvements. None of this has drawn the youth back.

CHALLENGE TO YOUTH

Youth will respond if unitedly challenged. I found for instance in my federated church research that youth work was generally nonexistent at the time of union, that youth groups were soon formed after union in most of them, and that only church membership statistics appeared more striking in subsequent favorable developments. Youth does want to be cooperative. In John Oxenham's

poem, "Greatheart," a questioner asks a youth: "Where are you going, Greatheart?" The reply is:

"To break down old dividing lines;
To carry out my Lord's designs;
To build again God's broken shrines."

There must be a concern by religious leaders to help our communities achieve a soul. Many localities are not true communities at all but merely unintegrated social areas with too few common values and mutual activities to be considered communities. We are too glib in applying the term "community" to many of our areas. Basically they are not communities because they lack a soul. We shall become more aware of this lack as sociologists follow the present trend to define the community more largely in psycho-social terms.

THIS IS RELIGION'S TASK

Now this is the task of religion. Religion ought to be the most unifying force in rural communities. Instead it is often the most divisive.

We may also question the degree of wholeness in individual life where communities are divided. How much individual integration of personality can people achieve unless they belong to an integrated community? We need investigations of the relation of individual and community integration. A few such studies have been made. We know something about the integration of both in Mennonite and Doukhobour communities. Do we not dare hope for the time when many of our communities may be unified and integrated by the forces of religion without isolating themselves from the world as have the Doukhobours, for instance?

Gilbert Beaver refers to the relation of the church to rural community life in his recent book, "Christ and Community." He quotes the findings of Gwinn and Fritts that the saving of our American civilization depends on its future leadership and the perpetuation of this leadership depends on developing in country communities a type of life that will retain or attract the right kind of potential parents. "They find, however, that this saving influence of country life will not prevail unless the rural churches cooperate to foster community life in its completeness. 'Our rural communities gape with need in the place that the church organization once filled.' Yet many members are so limited by sectarian or personal interests that they actually hinder one of the chief tasks of religion, the creation of community."*

COMMENTS ON FEDERATION

Many people recognize the validity of what we are saying here. Among them are those who live in communities where churches have successfully united or created other cooperative programs. Here are a few statements from people who responded with comments during my study of federated churches:

"Holds the community together in friendly relations" -- (Far West). "A far more effective Christian community" -- (Maine). "Church affairs become community affairs" -- (Vermont). "Improved village relationships" -- (Vermont). "Stronger church feelings in community" -- (New York). "An improved community

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* Gilbert A. Beaver, "Christ and Community," pp. 78-79. Association Press, New York, 1950. Used by kind permission of the publisher.

spirit" -- (Far West). "Causes better unity in the community. I believe there is more understanding of each other's problems and a realization of the pettiness of differences in a united church" -- (Vermont).

Another of our common concerns is to produce quality people, those with strong Christian character and personality. They were probably never more needed. Honesty, sobriety, intelligence, hard work, responsibility, and dedication -- to mention only a few attributes -- surely have a premium put upon them at all times. I am convinced that any breakdown in the national character is largely traceable to our homes and local communities, including rural. We cannot sidestep our responsibility.

We need communities which will provide the most favorable setting for character development. Most ministers do not stay in a community long enough to make a very lasting contribution toward creating such a setting.

We need more communities like Belleville. Some of you will remember Dr. C. J. Galpin's study of Belleville, New York, nearly fifty years ago and the United States Department of Agriculture report entitled, "The National Influence of a Single Farm Community," in which it was reported how over several generations hundreds of high calibre people were poured out to serve elsewhere with effectiveness and often with distinction. The homes and the schools were largely responsible, and they were supported by the church. It was a small, integrated community with high ideals of personal worth and service.

NEED OF INNER STRENGTH

Liberty Hyde Bailey has said that what we need is the "separate" soul. We need the kind of person who has inner strength, who does not run with the herd but can stand alone for his principles when necessary. Bailey contrasts the methods of aggregation and social intercourse with those of isolation and separateness, and says:

"Never in the open country do I see a young man or woman at nightfall going down the highways and the long fields but I think of the character that develops out of the loneliness, in the silence of vast surroundings, projected against the backgrounds, and of the suggestions that must come from these situations as contrasted with those that arise from the babble of the crowds. There is hardiness in such training; there is independence, the taking of one's own risk and no need of the protection of compensation-acts. There is no over-imposed director to fall back on."*

The environmental situation has greatly changed since Dr. Bailey wrote the above in 1917. Nevertheless the rural person, young or old, still has much opportunity to be alone, on his own resources, and yet be a part of a community which gives him support and encouragement as he develops and furnishes him a setting for the development of his social relationships.

It seems to me that we must have cooperative communities if we are to develop people with the character and personality and power in social relationships sufficient to create a more cooperative world. Their training begins in

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* Liberty Hyde Bailey, "The Holy Earth," pp. 91-92. The Christian Rural Fellowship, New York, reprinted 1946.

the community. The church has a very important role to play in the matter. It can teach cooperation by example or it can teach division.

An example of the latter is found in one of the moderately successful case churches. Nearly twenty years ago the churches federated, leaving separate women's groups, one church building, and two parsonages. One women's group sold their dilapidated parsonage and purchased an abandoned store which was fitted for social purposes. Through the years it has developed into a denominational symbol and rallying center. New dining tables were built extra heavy in order to discourage the other society from borrowing them! Once a year a joint harvest supper is held and ends in a rush by either side to count the silverware first, for neither group trusts the other. Both are sources of much gossip. Is it any wonder the federation lacks power?

FIGS AND THISTLES

We cannot have spiritual power in a community with this sort of thing going on, nor can we create personalities suitable for making the world a brotherhood. Figs are not reaped from thistles. What happens to us in our communities is directly related to the peace of the world.

Another of our common concerns is that there be an awareness of the basic importance of what has been termed "grass-roots ecumenicity" as contrasted with national and world ecumenicity. There are some leaders who find no contradiction whatever in working for a world union of churches while at the same time seeking to thwart corresponding local developments. I found in my federated church study that more than twenty-five per cent of the denominational executives responding believe they should have the power to veto the will of the people for a local federation -- and this in democratic America!

I am sure I do not stand alone in taking strong exception to this point of view. It seems to me to be almost entirely false. For many decades our denominational mountains have striven along these lines and have brought forth only a mouse. Not all leaders believe this way but enough of them do so to block even reasonable progress. Do they realize how ridiculous they appear to many laymen?

Fortunately there are leaders who emphasize the necessity of working at the bottom. They see the local as having significance. For myself, I would say that both world-wide and local church cooperation and union are needed. The two are more intimately related than is commonly supposed. We need to proceed on all levels simultaneously, but most basic are local developments.

My study of federated churches covered both successes and failures and revealed overwhelmingly that church people in localities where union has been effected believe that grass-roots ecumenicity is important. They believe sincerely that they are helping fulfill the prayer of Jesus that his followers might be one. The following comments are typical of the many we received from 2,103 people:

"Paves the way for further Christian cooperation" -- (Far West). "I joined this church after federation was made. Federation seems to be the answer to these two churches that joined together. The spirit is fine" -- (Maine). "Elimination of denominational jealousies" -- (Washington). "There is encouragement in numbers. Denomination is not put to the fore, but the body of Christ

is stressed. One gets a broader view of Christian service because it is a very happy union" -- (California). "Unity, not enmity" -- (Far West). "After having federated, we realize the church becomes richer in character" -- (Vermont).

WHERE CHANGE IS NEEDED

There were also some contrary views, but they were astonishingly few. Also surprising was that many people were objective enough to express both kinds of views as being in existence.

What we have been saying is that a change is needed in the point of view of many of our denominational leaders. It is high time they turned a larger share of their energies toward the development of cooperative efforts at the local level. The denominations need to see local union and cooperation as the important matter it is. I am happy to report that in my state a number of executives have this vision and are living it out with splendid results.

Many executives confess they are often puzzled to know how to deal with united churches, especially federations. It would seem that one of our greatest needs is to establish training or coaching conferences in order to help these leaders.

We also need more executives at the head of our denominations with more rural church experience in their backgrounds. Not many have a great deal.

IMPORTANCE OF ORIGIN

My study established a definite relationship between the attitudes of denominational executives and the location of their principal pastoral experience. Only one-third had spent more than half of their pastoral years in the open country or village under 2,500 population. In this group were a bishop of the Evangelical United Brethren Church, a state secretary of the Church of the Brethren, two associate executives of Presbyterian synods, a Baptist national secretary, and a Methodist superintendent. The other two-thirds of the executives had less than half of their pastoral experience in the country, and some never had any. Their attitudes were found to be twenty-four per cent less favorable toward cooperation and union than those who had spent more than half of their years in rural pastorates.

Someone may ask: How are we to make the cooperative approach in our communities? We must begin where we are -- face the very real existing needs, bring a representative group together to explore all possible means and program, and develop a plan which is indigenous to the community. Outside forces should not be permitted to stifle or thwart local initiative and ingenuity. Local democratic processes of group action should be faithfully followed. Organization should be at the deepest possible level of prayer and consecration. The plan adopted should be as thoroughgoing in the commitment required as it is possible to have accepted by the church people of the community or the congregations concerned.

ALL TYPES AND FORMS

I stand squarely in favor of all types and forms of cooperation and union. I favor no single plan for all localities but believe all should be considered and the best worked out for a specific community. What we need in our

communities is to be committed to the greatest extent possible and to be constantly growing in the graces of reconciliation and love.

There are a number of other steps which should be taken to help develop "grass-roots" ecumenicity. One of the most strategic is to introduce into the theological seminaries courses which will instruct the future clergy in the different types of cooperation and union and how to develop them in the community. Last year only eighteen seminaries offered such work, and many of those dealt only with ecumenicity at the levels outside the community.

There is a still more basic concern which we, pastors and laymen alike, should have, namely, to make ourselves fit to represent Christ. We can never do this alone. It takes his grace. But we must take the first step. Many things are involved in this, but I fail to see how we can achieve this fitness unless we become cooperatively-minded. Jesus prayed that his followers might be united, and we are not true representatives of him when we wilfully go our separate ways, when we do not seek to reconcile our differences and thus discover the ways of genuine cooperation and union.

There is a blessing which comes to the cooperative individual. There is an expansion of personality and ability. There is an enrichment of character and an increase of spiritual power. This was revealed again and again in the study of federations. It is true in any realm of united human action.

DIVISION NOT LIKED

There is an element in people which does not like division. There is also a contrary factor within the human soul which craves exclusiveness and separateness. The two tendencies war against one another in the soul and in society. The conflict runs throughout the universe. Yet it is true as Robert Frost also says: "Something there is that doesn't love a wall." I believe that "something" is divinely given. And it is our high function and privilege to lose ourselves in strengthening the forces of union. Thereby shall we find ourselves for we shall be serving more effectively our God and his children.

We do not fully represent Christ except as the spirit of reconciliation is expressed and shared by us. This is nothing new. The ministry of reconciliation is our business. It is the message of the Cross. There must be reconciliation between man and man, group and group, and between a man and his God.

What is new to many is the application of reconciliation to local cooperation between churches and, for that matter, between churches and other agencies. I am pleading that everyone of us seek constantly to be true examples of reconciliation, cooperation, and love in every relationship. What a goal! But nothing less will suffice as a goal. We are desperately needed as such examples.

The story is told of an Indiana tomato grower whose pickers were wasting a great many tomatoes until a Purdue professor solved the problem. The professor painted the fingernails of the women and girls with a blend which exactly matched the perfect red tomato, sent the pickers back to the fields, and they picked perfectly. Their standard was always before them.

WE ARE EXAMPLES

We are examples at the fingertips of people all about us in our rural communities. We are meant to be good and perfect examples of the Christian way of life. We must be examples of reconciliation and love if we are to rightly represent Christ.

I would like to raise this question. Is there such a thing as hybrid vigor which functions in the religious world as in the biological realm? United churches, for one thing, seem to exhibit the characteristics of hybrid vigor. Increased productivity and strength, new life and growth, are soon evident after genuine union occurs. This seems especially true of many federations.

The choosing of the best out of the heritage of two denominations -- best materials and methods and strongest lay leadership -- is a feature of most federations. The united approach to the community, the re-thinking of the program which is necessitated by union, and the securing of more adequate pastoral leadership -- all lend strength to the new undertaking. Most important is the spiritual power which comes from spirit meeting with spirit when the process of uniting has been conducted in a brotherly manner.

PROCESSES OF GROWTH

Union comes by the processes of growth. Growth, as Jesus expressed it, is a gradual spiritual matter. He compared spiritual growth with the development which takes place first in the blade, then the ear, after that the full corn on the ear. But before any of this growth can take place, someone must be preparing the soil. Many things are involved in growth. What we do not stop to realize is that the growth processes are always localized, rooted in time and place, and, in the case of spiritual concepts, rooted in human personalities and grounded in the eternal purposes and creative love of God.

I believe in cooperation and union. I believe it is most important, and most difficult, at the local level. Whatever our religious heritage, we hold many concerns together. I have mentioned but a few of them. We hold Christ in common. Let us never forget that we can bring Christ into a healing relationship to many of these concerns only as we become one in spirit and action.

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